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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4349

INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS PRIORITY

RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 9023

RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON PRIORITY 2412

RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1724

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 6331

RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 4889

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1031

RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 5632

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEAAIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

RHHMUNA/USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 002791

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/15/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM TH

SUBJECT: PPP ENDORSES SOMCHAI AS SAMAK DROPS BID FOR REELECTION AS THAI PM

REF: A. BANGKOK 2778 (SAMAK UNDERCUT)
1B. BANGKOK 2610 (EMERGENCY DECREE)

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

11. (C) Thailand's ruling People Power Party (PPP) announced September 15 that it would nominate former judge and current acting Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat, brother-in-law of former PM Thaksin Shinawatra, as prime minister in the upcoming September 17 parliamentary vote. The decision came in the wake of former PM Samak Sundaravej having abandoned his effort to win reelection. Figures from the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), still occupying Government House, have pledged to continue their protest if the PPP heads the next administration. Nevertheless, on September 14 the government lifted the state of emergency that Samak had imposed in Bangkok.

12. (C) Comment: Samak's sometimes crass and confrontational ways made him unpopular with many in Bangkok's middle and upper class (although we were able to develop a good working relationship with him). His dropping his bid for reelection should take some wind out of his opponents' sails. Somchai, who served as a judge for most of his career (bio to be provided septel), may well prove less inflammatory, though his family ties to Thaksin will make him an easy target for confirmed Thaksin haters in the PAD and beyond. The state of emergency appeared to have had little impact on both the PAD protest and everyday life in Bangkok. The effects of its declaration and revision appear to have been primarily symbolic domestically, though it likely shaped international concerns about stability in Thailand and affected tourism in particular. End Summary and Comment.

SAMAK STEPS ASIDE, SOMCHAI STEPS UP

13. (C) Following the September 12 boycott by governing coalition parties of the House of Representatives session to elect a new Prime Minister (ref A), former Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej announced through a trusted aide that he had

abandoned his effort to win reelection. Samak's withdrawal left three top People Power Party (PPP) figures -- acting Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat, Justice Minister Sompong Amornwiwat, and Deputy PM/PPP Secretary General Surapong Suebwonglee -- atop the short list heading into the rescheduled September 17 vote. On September 14, the three men jointly visited coalition partners, who indicated they would support whomever the PPP would select.

¶4. (C) A PPP meeting on September 15 endorsed the candidacy of Somchai. According to Thai press reports, Somchai's brother-in-law, former PM Thaksin Shinawatra, had weighed in from London on Somchai's behalf. Despite Somchai's family ties to Thaksin, Suthep Thaugsuban, Secretary General of the opposition Democrat Party, recently made positive public remarks about Somchai's background as a judge and high ranking civil servant.

STATE OF EMERGENCY ENDS, PROTESTS TO CONTINUE

¶5. (C) Nevertheless, leading figures of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) -- the protest group that remains encamped at Government House -- have said they would continue to protest any PPP-led administration. The PAD has reiterated its calls for a type of "new politics" that would entail choosing a PM from outside the current crop of elected MPs and restructuring the parliament so that a majority of legislators are selected by a committee of eminent figures, rather than being popularly elected.

¶6. (C) Despite the ongoing PAD protests, Somchai, in his capacity as Acting PM, on September 14 rescinded the state of

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emergency that Samak had declared earlier in September, but which was never enforced (ref B). The United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), a pro-government group that engaged in a September 2 street clash with the PAD that precipitated the state of emergency declaration, announced after the revision that it would resume rallies in Bangkok.
JOHN